ED 226 560 EC 151 047

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TITLE Creating Change in Special Education and School Psychological Services: A Framework for Collaboration.
PUB DATE 27 Aug 82
NOTE 14p ; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) - Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies, *Delivery Systems, *Disabilities, Elementary Secondary Education, *Labeling (of Persons), *State Programs
IDENTIFIER New Jersey

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews a collaborative effort in New Jersey to review their special education service delivery system with the intention of looking for alternatives to labeling of children. Problems with the current labeling system are considered, and difficulties in creating change are pointed out. New Jersey's model for change is described in terms of its five phases: review of the professional literature, organization of State Education Agency personnel, provision of demonstration projects to various districts, dissemination and outreach, and project policy formation. Four factors are seen to strengthen a delivery--careful planning, broad based participation, evaluation, and a high caliber of participants in all phases of the project. A chart illustrates the project phases. (SW)

Creating Change in Special Education and School Psychological Services: A Framework for Collaboration

by

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Running Head: Framework for Collaboration

Paper presented as part of a symposium, "Planned Organizational Change in Special Education Services: New Jersey's Approach," at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington D.C., August 27, 1982.

Abstract

The past two decades have been filled with change and growth in the delivery of school psychological and special education services. Perspectives on the years ahead lead to the conclusion that continued growth is likely. One area of possible change that greatly impacts school psychology is the system of special education labeling. New Jersey has currently undertaken a collaborative effort to review their service delivery system with the intention of looking for alternatives to the labeling of children. The effort involves five phases which are outlined: 1) review of the literature, 2) organizing for the effort, 3) demonstration projects, 4) dissemination and outreach effort and, 5) policy recommendations.

Those of us who have been involved in the delivery of school psychological and special education services over the past 10 to 20 years have been participants in a revolution in education and in the lives of the handicapped and their families. Much that has taken place during this period, beginning in the early sixties and continuing to this present day, can be looked upon with pride and a sense of accomplishment by those who have delivered these services. Many have participated in litigation, helped to develop legislation and regulations, trained the practitioner, etc. To say all of this is not to deny that this has been a period of stress and difficulty. For it certainly has! To the contrary the courts, advocacy groups, parents, and state and federal legislatures have kept us jumping with change and innovation; at times they have bogged us down with paperwork and procedural matters to assure prescribed safeguards.

The facts that recently the United States Supreme Court in the case of Amy Rowley (Board of Education v. Amy Rowley, 1982) issued its first ruling under P.L. 94-142, that there is an appeal pending in the Larry P. case (Larry P. v. Wilson Riles, 1978) and that a revision to the current federal regulations for P.L. 94-142 is pending should be sufficient to convince any observer that continued change and flux is a likely occurrence. As professional psychologists and educators we should not shrink from such pressures to change nor hide from their impact. Admittedly, it does become wearisome at times and perhaps one yearns for the stability that assumedly is associated with other professions. This is not to be our fate and most of us are in this profession because we are stimulated by change and growth and are motivated to learn. However, a little rest now and then would be nice too!

The Problem of Special Education Service Delivery

Our interest today relates to a very special component of the delivery of school psychological and special education services in the schools; that is, the labels that are affixed to handicapped children in order to provide such services. Public and professional concern over such labeling practices received much attention as a result of the work of Nicholas Hobbs (1975a; 1975b) and others (Bryan and Bryan, 1975; Carroll and Reppuci, 1978; Goodman, Gottlieb and Harrison, 1972). Concerns with such current special education labeling systems are wide-ranging. Some of the more common criticisms are that the typical labels are not related to educationally relevant factors and that they cause pain and discouragement for the individual and his or her family. More specific concerns as to the meaning of such labels have been raised by Kauffman (1977) who has focused on the problems associated with the "emotionally disturbed" (ED) category while Sontag, Smith and Sailor (1977) and Fox & Guess (1980) find little to differentiate children and the programs for those who fall into the more severe categories of many of the handicapping conditions. We are all familiar with the ongoing problem of the educable mentally retarded (EMR) label and the disproportionate representation of minorities in this classification category (Manni, Winikur, Keller, 1980; in press).

The problems identified with the current labeling system and the associated negative fallout rarely generates counter debate. What maintains such a system then, is the difficulty in finding a viable alternative. In their excellent review of special education labeling practices Gross and Gottlieb (in press) struck to the heart of the explanation as to why such a system is continued. They wrote:

> Each of these hurdles must be addressed if organizations, state and local, are to sustain a movement to break away from our love affair with categories. Probably the single most important hurdle in this change process is offering teachers, parents and learners a viable alternative to the current system (p.27).

The Problem of Creating Change

While several states such as Massachusetts, Vermont, and South Dakota do have variations of the traditional categorical model, various aspects of each of their systems are not entirely satisfactory. Within New Jersey there has been a history of sentiment and efforts for the development of a noncategorical special education system (Winikur, Keller, Stefkovich, Note 1). However, specific legislative attempts at introducing such a system have been frustrated. After recent efforts, it became apparent that systemic changes in the organization and delivery of special education and school psychological services would require extensive planning. As a consequence of our previous failures, the State Department of Education developed a comprehensive plan that was systematic in nature and broad in scope. Identified as a planned change approach for the consideration of alternative models for special education and psychological service delivery, the project first analyzed the shortcomings of the previous efforts. Components of the project were developed, planned and then operationalized for action. They included relationship with constituent groups, literature reviews, development of demonstration projects, identification of political forces to be attended to, an evaluation design, a process for legislative development and the generation of regulations.

A Model for Creating Change

The actual plan for creating a new service delivery system had as its basis the assumption that substantive change could and would not occur without the participation and acceptance of a broad range of constituencies. The plan of action as well as phases of the project are reflected in Figure 1. At the center of this representation is the expression of the goal statement; i.e., to "determine the advisability and feasibility of alternative special education delivery systems." In order to actualize their goal, five project phases were developed:

Phase I - Review of Professional Literature

In this phase our intent was to gain a thorough knowledge of what the research literature had to say about categorical and noncategorical systems of special education service delivery. We were also interested in those states such as Massachusetts, Vermont, South Dakota, which had variations in the traditional service delivery system as well as models used by other countries. With all of this information, we had acquired a sense of the state of the art which could be used by those of us who did planning and development work and by all other interested groups and individuals of which there are many.

Phase II - State Education Agency (SEA) Organizational Framework

In order to undertake such a project we realized that the state had to commit a significant amount of resources particularly in terms of personnel time for this effort. We organized ourselves in the following manner. We established

an SEA advisory unit that was made up of people within the Department of Education, field based and central office based, who would react to proposed plans for policy directions and implementation efforts. Out of this unit is comprised a project coordinating unit which carries the bulk of the workload in terms of development of materials, coordination, planning and implementation. Each of those sites was assigned an SEA facilitator, an individual from our staff who is directly responsible for helping that school district plan and implement its part of the project that related to the overall effort. Their responsibilities were to serve as an information provider, a prodder where that was necessary, and a motivator. Further, this serves as someone who is on site periodically so as to assure that regulatory mandates were adhered to and that quality control efforts are in place. Finally, we utilized external consultants who carry out a variety of functions including the literature review, evaluation of the demonstration projects and as facilitators for planning.

Phase III - Demonstration Projects

This component is a major element in the overall project effort. Through a formal identification procedure, we asked people throughout the state to nominate districts who would be interested in participating in this project. The role of these participants was to focus upon different components of the service delivery model such as early identification, prevention, evaluation team composition, program development, etc., and use this project to experiment with an alternative that hopefully improved service delivery in a cost-effective manner and lent itself to a system which focused on programmatic rather than disability labels. These LEA sites were selected because of their

commitment to the development of an alternative, their ability to deliver services in the traditional manner and the district's willingness to commit personnel to work on this project. Other than interest and professionalism the incentives for the district to participate were almost non-existent.

Project districts were asked to submit preliminary proposals which we reviewed. We visited each of the sites and discussed with the district the State Department's goals. They presented their interests and issues and we (the SEA) were assured that the superintendent and the board of education were involved and committed to the effort. A year was spent in carefully designing and planning each of the demonstration site projects and in assuring that the project was able to be evaluated. There are certain legal and fiscal considerations attached to these projects which will be discussed in a later presentation.

Phase IV - Dissemination/Outreach Efforts

We recogize the importance of keeping all constituent groups that have an investment in the special education service delivery system informed of what we were doing and how we were doing it. As you can see from Figure 1, we identified most of the interested groups and maintained ongoing communication through a variety of dissemination efforts including publications by the Department, meetings with and presentations to them, articles for newsletter, press releases, etc.

Phase V - Project Policy Formation

In this phase of the project we developed what we initially termed the "blue ribbon commission." Later it became known as the "Special Education Study Commission" and was comprised of civic and education leaders throughout the state. On this commission are presidents of professional associations, representatives from the school boards' and teachers' associations, five state legislators including the chairperson of the Assembly Education and Senate Education Committees, the past Assembly Education Committee chair serves as the commission chair. We have representatives from universities; such people as Leon Kamin from Princeton University, Herb Goldstein from New York University and Milton Schwebel from Rutgers University, names which would be familiar to psychologists. Leaders from the business community, LEA, parent and State Board of Education representatives also participate an this commission.

Our attempt was to draw upon a wide range of individuals who did not necessarily have an investment in special education but who were concerned with issues relative to education, were thoughtful and open-minded with respect to the current delivery system. The charge to the commission was to review the current system, consider alternatives to that system, evaluate the data from the demonstration projects, listen to experts in the field and eventually make recommendations to the State Department. Operating within a two year timeline, the Commission will make recommendations to the Commissioner's Advisory Council for the Handicapped and the Commissioner of Education as to whether or not there should be wide-ranging change in the system, some change was necessary, or the system basically was sound and should be maintained with a slight regulatory alteration.

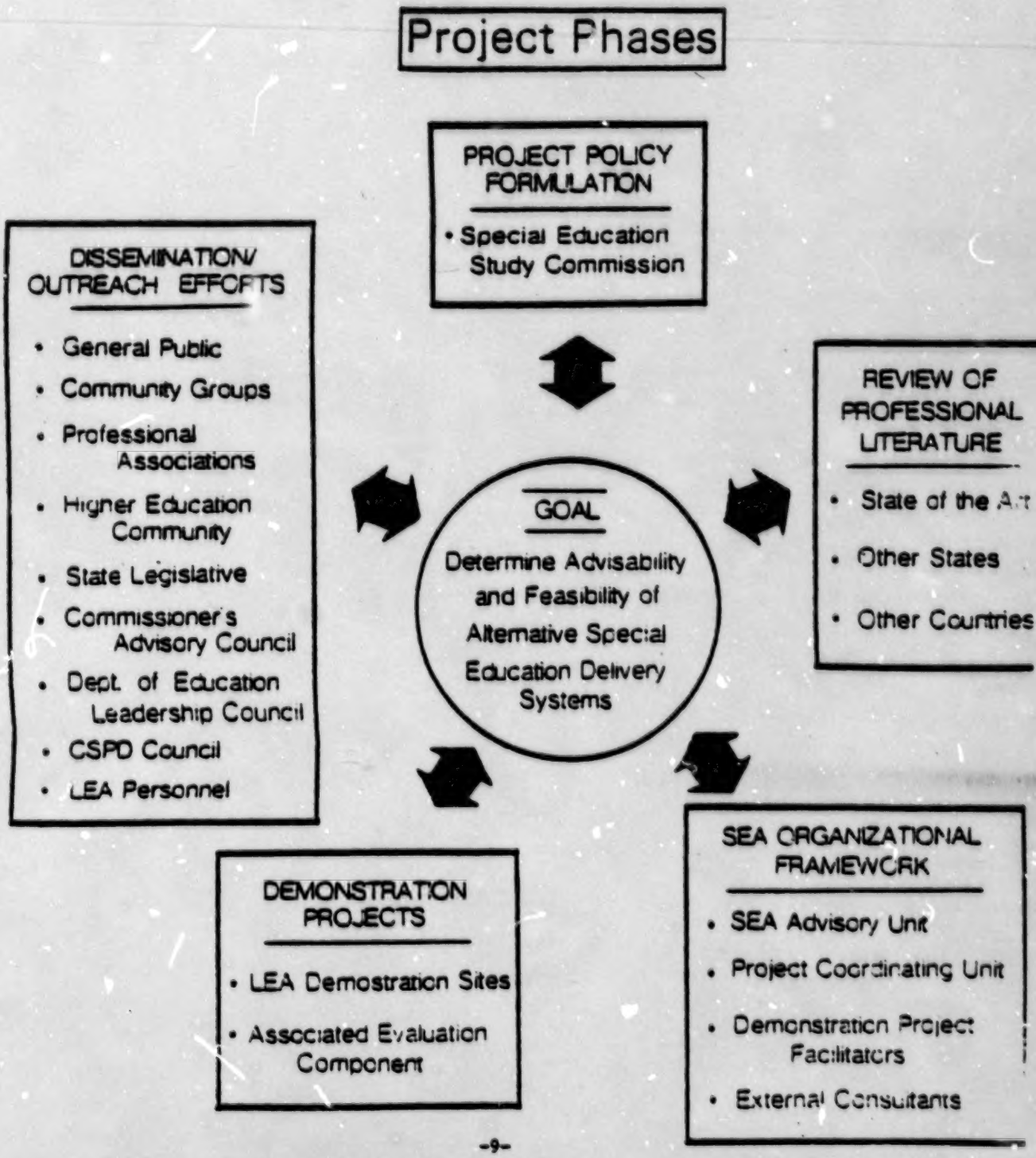
Conclusions

This attempt to study, experiment with and consider changes in a major educational delivery system represents a departure in the typical style of operation associated with most large bureaucratic institutions. The utilization of a planned change approach and the collaboration effort described herein does not represent a "quick fix" mentality. We are attempting to be thoughtful and studied in our efforts and are trying to build a consensus as we approach the future.

If the process is successful and the delivery system, no matter what its form, is strengthened then four factors undeniably would account for such an outcome: 1) careful planning, 2) broad based participation, 3) evaluation, and most importantly, the 4) high caliber of participants in all phases of the project.

Figure 1 Framework for Collaboration

PROJECT TO STUDY ALTERNATIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEMS



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